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ABSTRACT

This study presents a framework for instructional programs based on four assumptions about the sociocultural background of black children: (1) black children share a common cultural heritage, a history of oppression and racial injustice in America; (2) black children grow and develop in a family environment that is historically different in customs and organization from that of the dominant culture; (3) black communities are instrumental in supporting attitudes, beliefs, and values of black people, thus enhancing self-concepts of black children; and (4) black children have unique abilities and strengths that help them to deal effectively with their environment. A questionnaire about these assumptions and about planning programs based on them was sent to 55 black scholars of whom 35 (63 per cent of the sample) responded. There was generally high agreement among the scholars, specifically concerning the importance of cultural heritage, family, and community, and the development of unique black strengths. Items generating low agreement concerned the importance of monthly workshops, familial styles and structures, employment of teachers from the community, and acceptance of black children's language in school. Staff members of eight black participant programs were also interviewed; their responses revealed that most programs made no effort to consider black sociocultural background as a necessary part of educational needs. Findings suggest that educators must become sensitive to cultural differences among children and develop programs responsive to the needs of all. (BJD)

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The Black Child:

Some Sociocultural Considerations

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Introduction

The schooling of Black children in America is one of the most controversial issues in education today. The issue is a continuing one in American history but received new and significant attention almost a quarter of a century ago when the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of Brown v. Board of Education 1954 that the doctrine of 'separate but equal' was illegal in educational practices. This decision, which attempted to outlaw segregation by race in public education, legalized the idea of equal educational opportunity and prompted numerous research studies on Black children. The research that evolved tended to support two general theories, the cultural deficit theory (Bernstein, 1960; Deutsch, 1964; Bereiter and Englemann, 1966; Weikart, 1967; Klaus and Gray, 1968; Nimnicht, Meier, and McAfee, 1969) and the cultural difference theory (Baratz and Baratz, 1970; Ginsburg, 1970; Melmed, 1970; Rystrom,1970; Labov, 1972; Simons and Johnson, 1974). The proponents of both of these theories believed that Black children should be acculturated into the dominant society even though their underlying philosophies and their methods of achieving acculturation were different. It is our belief that because these two theories were based on this assumption, they cannot provide an accurate framework for describing the behavior of Black children. Moreover, these models are not adequate because: 1) they were developed as a result of the socio-political climate of the 1960's which made it necessary for the development of educational programs for minority children; 2) most of the programs were developed by white social scientists who generally had preconceived notions about the abilities and experiences of minority people; and 3) the research which supported these theories was comparative in nature. Billingsley (1972)

explained the flaw in comparative social science research when he stated that:

> Much of the social science analysis of Black people is comparative in nature. It compares the intimate situations of Black people with those of the white community. The conceptual fallacy of this technique of analysis has seldom been analyzed. Such comparative analysis presupposes that at one time in history Black people and white people lived on a basis of equality and were subjected to equal supports and resources from this society. Consequently, any divergence in behavior, attitudes, or conditions from this basis of equality and similarity must be explained. Yet we know by the reality of our lives that no such basis of equality ever existed in this country, but we have developed no tools of analysis that starts with the basis of inequality. which has always existed.

Because of this basic flaw in social science research, the purpose of this paper is to present an alternative for planning programs for Black children. We contend that an understanding of Black children's sociocultural background is essential in the development of programs for them.

The Framework

Four assumptions have been developed which describe the sociocultural experiences of Black children.

Assumption I, Black children share a common cultural heritage, a history of oppression and racial injustice in America is based on the belief that the cultural background of Black children is different in significant ways from the cultural background of most white children. The history of Black Americans is ingrained in an oppressive and discriminatory system which has delegated Blacks to the position of a castelike minority. In spite of their position in this society, Black people have developed survival mechanisms for coping with enslavement, oppression, and degradation which form the basis for the Black cultural system (Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974; Blauner, 1970; Huggins, 1977; Levine, 1971). The elements that have influenced the development of the Black cultural system

include: 1) unity, solidarity, and collective resistance; 2) strong sense of family; 3) a unique form of religion; 4) a creative and expressive language system; and 5) music.

Unity, solidarity, and collective resistance is the first element of Black culture. During slavery, the slaves showed impressive unity, solidarity, and collective resistance to their masters (Blassingame, 1972; Bennett, 1975; Genovese, 1974; Gutnam, 1976; Aptheker, 1971). Historians (Blassingame, 1972; Bennett, 1975; Genovese, 1974) noted that the slave quarters provided the primary environment for slaves and it was in this environment where the slaves developed their norms of conduct, created their rules, defined their behavior, and learned cooperation and solidarity. It was also in this environment where the second element of Black culture was developed and fostered.

The development of strong family and kinship relations was vital to the existence and survival of the Black slaves. The family even though it was an unusually fragile institution was the center of the slave community (Bennett, 1966; Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974). The family provided the slave with love, understanding, and served as the primary socializing agent for children. In spite of the suffering of Black adult slaves, they showed love and affection to their children and made every effort to shield them from hardship and abuse. Slave parents worked to protect their children from the shock of bondage, taught them values different from those of the masters, and gave them a referent for self-esteem other than their masters (Bennett, 1966; Blassingame, 1972). The slaves were able to preserve and maintain the existence of the Black family in spite of unrelenting circumstances.

Religion, another element of Black culture, was instrumental in sustaining family life because it provided the slaves with beliefs and values which supported their way of life and gave them a positive outlook for the future. Since religion was a very important part of the slaves life, the church served as the major social center in the slave community. Staples (1976) noted that the church provided a meeting place for friends, furnished avenues for exercising leadership; and provided opportunities for releasing pent-up emotions. Also, the slaves strong religious faith helped them to conquer their fear of the slave master because it incorporated African traditions such as witchcraft, magic, and vodoo; consequently, producing a new form of Christianity (Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974). Moreover, Black religion helped to create a collective identity and pride and influenced other areas of Black culture including language and music.

The language of the slave community served as a liberating mechanism because of its African-American origins; hence, the unique features of the Black vernacular gave the slave community a means of communicating which was difficult for the white community to understand because of its ambiguity. In effect, the slaves were able to communicate with each other in the presence of whites with some measure of safety (Lester, 1968; Levine, 1977; Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974). The language of the slaves was also instrumental in advancing the tradition of Black folk tales and folk songs. The folk tales and songs described the slaves work, loves, and expressed the realities of oppression (Blassingame, 1972).

These elements which we have briefly described have provided the foundation for a Black cultural system. It is this heritage which has sustained and influenced the survival of Blacks in America for more than three centuries; therefore, we contend that it is absurd to consider the development of Black children without considering this heritage.

Our second assumption, Black children grow and develop in a family environment which is historically different in customs and organization from that of the dominant culture, has its roots in the cultural traditions of West Africa. The structure of the Black family is based on an extended family or cooperative community (Noble, 1974; King, 1976). The Black extended family has established itself as an agent for the survival and advancement of Black people by providing them with mutual networks within the Black community to deal effectively with the difficulties of family life by pooling their social and economic resources (Hill, 1978p Martin & Martin, 1978). Thus, the extended Black family family is an agent for the survival and advancement of Black people and provides the foundation for the structure of the American Black family even though it is not the only family structure in the Black community. Changes in the structure of the Black family have occurred as a result of the socialization of Blacks in America.

The extended Black family supports and maintains strong kinship bonds between family members and encourages attitudes which view children as a valuable resource to the Black family and community. Acceptance and love are basic to the relationship between Black parents and Black children (Washington, 1976). Washington (1976) maintains that Black

people give love unconditionally to their children; hence, love is a part of the acceptance and inclusiveness which characterizes the Black family and community. Even though Black children are loved, they must deal with a difficult environment and it is the function of the family to socialize Black children into the multiple roles that they must perform in society. The family must prepare them to take on not only the appropriate age and sex roles, but also they must teach their children their appropriate racial roles, socializing them to the realities of white racism (Staples, 1976; White, 1972; King, 1976; Martin & Martin, 1978).

> The socialization processes that Black parents put their children through have the functional value of increasing the chances that Black children will survive. It is because of this training that many Black youth are able to cope wtih the seemingly overwhelming difficulties of their lives. . .(King, 1976).

Consequently, the child rearing practices of Black parents are based on the belief that Black children must be taught to survive in a hostile and oppressive society. These attitudes are a result of cultural and historical traditions which define the social and economic status of Blacks in America. However, the extent to which the Black family actually resembles the theoretical model we have described varies from community to community and depends on the socioeconomic status of the family and the degree of assimilation or upward mobility the family has achieved.

Our third assumption, Black communities are instrumental in supporting the attitudes, beliefs, and values of Black people; thus enhancing the self-concepts of Black children, is based on the idea that since the large majority of Black children still live in Black communities they develop their values, attitudes, and beliefs based on their experiences in those communities. We contend that the Black

community is a valuable resource to many Black children because it exposes them to a bicultural environment. In general, the Black community in response to economic instability and residential segregation has become a:

> A highly diversified, interrelated aggregate of people who unite into relatively cohesive structures in response to white oppression, racism, and patterned repression. The diversity within the Black community manifests itself in economic life, occupational pursuits, earned income, business ventures and successes and failures. . . (Blackwell, 1975).

This highly diversified community serves as a socializing agent for Black children. The Black community defines what is good and desirable and what is bad and undesirable from the standpoint of its own interest. Black children are taught what it means to belong to minority group in a white dominated society. Specifically, they learn acceptance of their cultural heritage and a sense of racial pride which is not a 1960's phenomenon but a part of the Black experience that can be traced to the beginnings of Black people in America. In addition, the Black community supports a positive sense of self. These attitudes and beliefs are often transmitted through interactions with Black people in the community and through social institutions. The Black community serves as a reference for Black children, often processing and filtering information from the larger society (Matthews, 1972; Ladner, 1971; Staples, 1976; Barnes, 1972; Giovanni, 197 ; and King & Karlson, 1978).

The Black community as a resource and a positive self-reference for Black children is a controversial issue. Ladner (1971) offers an explanation:

> Many books have been written about the Black community but very few have dealt with the intricate lives of the people who live there. By and large, they have attempted to analyze and describe the pathology which allegedly characterizes the lives of its inhabitants while at the same time making its residents responsible for its creation. . .

> Few authorities on the Black community have written about the vast amount of strength and adaptability of the people. Their power to cope and adapt to a set of unhealthy conditions--not as stereotyped sick people but as normal ones--is a factor which few people seem to accept or realize. The ways that Blacks have adapted to poverty and racism, and yet emerged relatively unscarred, are a peculiar quality which Americans should commend.

Black children's lives are influenced by their experiences and for the large majority of Black children these experiences are largely a result of living and interacting with other people in a Black community which is circumscribed by Black norms, values, and attitudes. The training that Black children receive in the Black community often provides most of them with adaptive and survival abilities which contribute to their endurance and tenacity in an often hostile, oppressive, and demeaning society. As a result of their tenacity, adaptability, and perservering nature, Black children have developed several unique strengths and abilities.

The fourth assumption, Black children have many unique abilities and strengths which help them to deal effectively with their environment describes their: 1) unique communication system; 2) resourcefulness and social perceptiveness; 3) creativity and spontaneity; and 4) real world orientation. The language system which is used by many Black children has been described by terms such as Negro Nonstandard English, Black Dialect, Black Idiom, and Ebonics. For the most part, these terms do not adequately explain the comprehensive nature of the Black language system because they only describe individual segments of language such as structure or function.

The language of Black America is more than a linguistic system; it is an expressive cultural system (Smitherman, 1977; Abrahams, 1973; Levine, 1977). Smitherman (1977) states that:

> Black dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture.

Black dialect is spoken by many Black children who live in the inner city and rural south. According to most research (Labov, 1970), there is no one form of Black English and it is difficult to determine the number of Black English speakers since it varies according to age, socio-economic status, and geographic region. Even though many Black children speak a nonstandard dialect we can assume that Black children like all children except the severely handicapped have the same basic vocabulary, possess the same capacity for learning, and use the same logic as other English speakers. Their language system provides them with the ability to communicate their needs, desires, beliefs, and aids them in structuring their world. In addition to the structural functions of language the verbal behavior of Black children is influenced by situations and the people who are involved in the interactions. Black children often appear to be more verbal when interacting with peers (Labov, 1970; Abrahams, 1973; Cazden, 1970; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972). Nonverbal communication patterns are also an important part of the Black child's communication system. Nonverbal patterns such as eye-avoidance techniques, rolling eyes, and certain walking styles can often explain how Black children are responding to a situation (Johnson, 1971).

In addition to an expressive language system, Black children must learn at a very early age how to manipulate their environment and how to play different roles and at the same time maintain their self-respect and identity. In order to achieve this, many Black children develop

skills which demonstrate their resourcefulness, social perceptiveness, creativity, spontaneity, and real world orientation. Social scientists have noted that by the age of six or seven most Black children have already had at least four different experiences with society. The first being a nonracist social interaction with family members; the second being the first racist assaults on them; the third is the militant rejection of the first racist they meet; and the fourth is the realization that their individual responses have little meaning in a society which is racist. As a result of these early experiences, most Black children, by the age of 10, have to use their resourcefulness and social perceptiveness to analyze and interpret their role in society. Many Black children begin to understand and have knowledge of how certain social institutions work for and against them. They are often able to analyze situations and the attitudes of people around them. This astuteness depends on how many experiences the Black child has had in the larger society; consequently, as a Black child has more and more experiences they learn to adapt and accommodate depending on what is apropriate. Black children often have creative and spontaneous methods of adapting to these situations which is encouraged by home environments which foster the development of a quick wit and responsiveness.

These four assumptions have examined the elements which we believe influence the lives of a majority of Black children in America. We realize that there is no monolithic Black child and that the effect that these elements have on individual Black children varies from person to person; family to family; and community to community; however, it is our contention that this framework gives a more realistic starting point for examining the behavior of Black children and planning programs for

them. To give validity to our framework we surveyed Black scholars who were working in the area of child development.

Validation of the Framework

A second part of the study involved surveying Black scholars who were knowledgeable in the field of Black child development. The validation sample consisted of fifty-five Black scholars who were chosen because they had national visibility. A questionnaire based on the framework was sent to each scholar to determine the extent that they agreed or disagreed with our framework. Thirty-five scholars or sixty-three percent of the sample responded to our questionnaire. Certain questions guided our interpretation of the responses: 1) On which items did the scholars agree with us?; 2) On which items did the scholars disagree with us?; and, 3) On which items did the scholars agree with each other?

There was general agreement among the scholars about the importance of the elements that were identified in the questionnaire. Specifically, there was high agreement among the scholars concerning the importance of cultural heritage in the development of educational programs for Black children. They agreed that it was essential: 1) to use curriculum which reflected the cultural background of Black children; 2) to use materials which reflected Black values, norms, and perspectives; 3) to use nonracist books and materials; and 4) to stress humanism or the worth and importance of people (See Table I). Likewise, many of the scholars agreed that the family and the community were an important part of the child's life and that educators needed to be sensitive to this issue when developing programs (See Tables II and III). Equally important was the notion that programs should be developed that consider the unique strengths of Black children and which encouraged creativity and spontaneity and encouraged the

TABLE I

ASSUMPTION: BLACK CHILDREN SHARE A COMMON CULTURAL HERITAGE, A HISTORY OF SLAVERY, OPRESSION, AND RACIAL INJUSTICE IN AMERICA

		Frequency			
	Items	Essential	Very Important	Important	Percent
Q1:	Cultural Background	29	4	1	97.1
Q2:	Unity, Solidarity	17	6	7	88.2
Q3:	Materials, Black	24	5	5	97.1
Q4:	Positive Contributions	27	4	2	94.3
Q5:	Nonracists Materials	28	3	1	97.0
Q6:	Oppression	23	7	2	91.4
Q7:	Recruit Blacks	21	8	4	94.3
Q8:	Humanism	22	7	3	97.0
Q9:	Workshops	8	5	13	81.3
Q10:	Understand History	17	6	5	84.8

TABLE II

ASSUMPTION II: BLACK CHILDREN GROW AND DEVELOP IN A COMPLEX FAMILY ENVIRONMENT WHICH IS DIFFERENT IN CUSTOMS, ORGANIZATION, AND PERSPECTIVE FROM THAT OF THE DOMINANT CULTURE

	Items	Frequency			Percent
		Essential	Very Important	Important	
Q11:	Family Values	21	8	4	97.1
Q12:	Family Structures	20	4	8	97.0
Q13.	Families, Fqual	16	6	2	70.0
Q14:	Socializing Agent	15	7	7	87.9
Q15:	Black Family Values	18	5	6	96.7
Q16:	Parent Participation	13	11	7	88.6
Q17:	Support Systems	15	4	8	84.4
Q18:	Recruit Teachers	21	7	5	97.1
Q19:	Parent-Teacher	15	12	5	94.1
Q20:	Family Relationships	18	7	7	94.1

TABLE III

ASSUMPTION III: BLACK CHILDREN GROW UP IN COMMUNITIES WHICH SUPPORT THEIR "BLACKNESS" AND HELPS THEM TO DEVELOP A VIEW OF THEMSELVES WHICH REFLECTS THE POSITIVE ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS OF THE BLACK FAMILY WHICH IS OFTEN CONTRADICTORY TO THE VIEWS OF THE LARGER SOCIETY

	Items	Frequency			Percent
		Essential	Very Important	Important	
Q21:	Neighborhood Teachers	5	7	11	65.7
Q22:	Community-Curriculum	10	10	6	76.5
Q23:	Decision-Making	16	5	6	79.4
Q24:	Socialization	24	7	2	97.1
Q25:	Group Orientation	13	8	8	82.9
Q26:	Transmit Values	22	7	4	97.1
Q27:	Black Church	16	7	2	73.5
Q28:	Access to School	17	8	3	80.0
Q29:	Political Power	17	3	7	84.4
Q30:	Open Communication	21	4	7	97.0

development of basic academic skills (See Table IV).

There were several items which did not receive high agreement among the scholars. The first item which dealt with the importance of monthly workshops received relatively low agreement. Many scholars felt that conducting workshops was not the most effective method of bringing about change and imparting information to teachers. The second item which was questioned by the respondents was the idea that all family styles and structures were equally valuable since we generally accept the notion that two parent families are the most acceptable. The third item which caused some disagreement among the scholars was the employment of teachers from the community or neighborhood; and using the community as a primary source for developing curriculum since many believe that to encourage a Black cultural system is to destroy one's chances of upward mobility. The last item which caused some disagreement among the scholars was the accepted use of Black children's language i school even if it was a nonstandard dialect. Many of the scholars questioned the idea of allowing Black children to use their natural language in school because they generally believed that to allow Black children to use their language suggested that we did not consider the importance or prestige attached to speaking Standard English. The nonagreement responses to the items mentioned were primarily based on the belief in the importance of assimilating Black children in to the dominant culture. The scholars saw the items mentioned as an obstruction to social upward mobility.

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient Matrix was calculated on each response to measure the relationship of agreement between the respondents on an item to item basis. Since agreement was generally high on items,

TABLE IV

ASSUMPTION IV: BLACK CHILDREN HAVE MANY UNIQUE STRENGTHS AND ABILITIES WHICH HELP THEM DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENT

	Items	Frequency			Percent
		Essential	Very Important	Important	
Q31:	Support Language	12	2	11	71.4
Q32:	Use Home Language	6	4	10	58.8
Q33:	Features BE	17	4	10	76.5
Q34:	Basic Skills	25	5	2	94.5
Q35:	Immediate Environment	13	5	7	73.5
Q36:	Creativity, Spontaneity	21	7	3	91..
Q37:	Self-Sufficient, Independent	28	3	1	94.1
Q38:	Coping Skills	22	7	3	97.0
Q39:	Constructive Purposes	27	5	1	97.1
Q40:	Language Workshops	18	4	6	84.8

intercorrelations were strong; however, there were notable exceptions. The items included issues related directly to educational policy such as the employment of staff from the community, use of a nonstandard dialect in school, the development of curriculum which reflects the immediate environment of the child, and the acceptance of all family styles and structures as equal. It is our belief that these exceptions are closely related to the views of the dominate culture and the notion of who controls the educational system.

Application of the Framework

To examine the relationship between our framework and existing educational programs, we visited eight programs that Black children participated in. The programs were either developed as independent Black programs or early intervention programs. They were located in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina. Questions were developed from the framework which were asked of the program's administrator. Also, published materials were used as a source of information.

After interviewing program staff and considering all available data on the educational programs, we found that most of the programs did not make an effort to consider the sociocultural background of Black children as a necessary part of their educational and developmental needs. The programs were primarily concerned with the assimilation of Black children into the dominant culture. Specifically, there was little evidence that Black children participated in the programs except through their physical appearance. Books and other instructional materials used in the programs were not diverse and did not reflect the culture of Black children. There was little consideration given to their culture and lifestyle in the development of educational programs. There was some indication that many program

developers believed that acknowledgement of one's culture had to be exclusive of academic achievement. There was one notable exception, a Follow Through program located in Johnson County, North Carolina. There was an obvious effort which was demonstrated through the employment of staff, use of nonracist materials, and the involvement of parents and community in the educational process. Walking into this school one recognized immediately that it was a place for children and that Black children belonged there, too.

Conclusion

We believe that our framework which is based on four assumptions about the sociocultural background of Black children offers a more realistic approach to planning programs for Black children. Since there was general agreement among the scholars we surveyed, we maintain that the framework can provide educators with a starting point to begin to look at the strengths of Black children and to translate those strengths into educational programming. We are acutely aware that there is a lack of programs that consider the sociocultural background of children in their educational planning; consequently, many children attend schools which are not sensitive to their cultural needs and are therefore unable to offer a sound educational program. For example, children who are constantly exposed to and taught by professionals who do not accept their language or their skin color can be expected to do poorly in school. Children who are taught through omission that they do not exist can also be expected to perform poorly in school. Educators must become sensitive to cultural differences among children and use the strengths to develop programs which are responsive to the needs of <u>all</u> children.

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